

SUMMARY -- HB 525

Intellectual Diversity in Higher Education

- (1) States as a mutual goal, that Montana's state universities be places where diverse opinions are both tolerated and encouraged. The bill recognizes that intellectual diversity is the "foundation of learning" and that higher education should make a deliberate effort to expose students to a variety of ideologies and perspectives, and to create an environment where claims to truth are openly tested and ideas freely exchanged. Academia itself should take the initiative to provide balance, avoid indoctrination and enhance real academic freedom. (section 2.)
- (2) Urges the Board of Regents to call upon each unit of the university system to provide an annual report to the legislature. This report will address measures being taken to ensure intellectual diversity and academic freedom (section 4.)
- (3) The bill lists a variety of areas on which the reports may focus, at the university units' discretion. Suggested among these are a study to assess the current state of intellectual diversity, grievance procedures, balance in speakers programs, dealing with hecklers, student course evaluations, hiring, tenure and promotion policies, freedom of the press, etc. (section 4.)
- (4) Establishes that the Education and Local Government Interim Committee will hold annual hearings where each U-system unit may discuss their report and other related matters. Hearings will be open to students, faculty members, outside experts and the general public. (section 5.)

COMMENTS: Some may claim that the abuses of "political correctness," while widespread elsewhere, are not a problem on campuses in Montana. But how do we know if that is true, or to what extent the problem may exist? This bill establishes no rules for the U-system, nor does it impose any kind of external controls. It is an "accountability through transparency" bill. It says, on the one hand, that intellectual diversity and academic freedom are important priorities to us. On the other hand, that the legislature seeks to partner with the university units, by encouraging them to ask the difficult questions, to study and assess the problem, and if necessary, take appropriate action. It is about building ongoing internal systems of self-examination. Freedom does not exist in a vacuum. It involves responsibility and accountability toward others. Freedom is the one thing you cannot possess until you are willing to give it away. Academic freedom can only be claimed by a member of the faculty if he or she is willing to afford the same liberty of conscience, of thought and inquiry to the students that our U-system exists solely to serve. Tolerance, openness and intellectual freedom run both ways.